

Unity in Diversity

Voluntary Guidelines to Secure Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries (VG-SSF) promise an overarching framework that recognizes the rights of fishing communities to life and livelihood

Twenty-five years on, the rights of fishworkers and their communities, notably those in the small-scale and artisanal sectors, to life and livelihood continue to be a central plank in the work of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). In the years since its founding in 1986, considerable support has been garnered towards defending the rights of fishworkers and their communities. Indeed, there are now increasing calls for the adoption of a 'human-rights approach'

approach has an intrinsic rationale, in as much as achieving the human rights of all citizens is an end in itself. Adopting this approach also has an instrumental rationale in that it is likely to lead to better and more sustainable human-development outcomes, recognizing that the development of responsible and sustainable small-scale fisheries is possible only if the political, civil, social, economic and cultural rights of fishworkers are addressed in an integrated manner.

Interest in, and support for, a human-rights approach to fisheries is on the increase, and is being discussed in many forums, notably in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has also taken up the issue of fisheries and the right to food, making explicit the link between the right to food and the rights of those who produce it to fair access to productive resources such as land and water, and to obtain a fair share of the benefits from their labour.

In the document on *The Contribution of the Right to Food to Combating Hunger and Malnutrition: What It Means and Why It Matters*, Olivier De Schutter, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, notes: "Governments now understand that hunger is not simply a problem of supply and demand, but ... a lack of access to productive resources such as land and water ... and of insufficient safety nets to support the poor. They understand... (that) they should now pay greater attention both to the imbalances of power in the food systems and to the failure to support the ability of small-scale farmers to feed themselves, their families and their communities."

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to fisheries. Such an approach places human rights at the centre of fisheries policy dialogue and at the centre of the debate on fisheries development. It is an approach that challenges a more technical rights-based approach, which tends to promote economic interests and economic development over social development. Often based on assigning property rights to individual fishers or companies, this latter approach tends to favour the individual over the collective, and corporate interests above community interests, and to see fisheries through a productionist lens.

A human-rights approach to fisheries recognizes that development efforts in fisheries should contribute to securing the freedom, wellbeing and dignity of all fisher people everywhere. The adoption of a human-rights

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We could add 'small-scale fishers' in this regard, and demand greater attention to supporting them in their endeavors "to feed themselves, their families and their communities".

Indeed, the report from the 28th Session of the FAO's Committee on Fisheries (COFI 28) in March 2009 highlighted that: "the often precarious conditions of small-scale and indigenous fishing communities... are mainly due to insecure access and user rights to land and fishery resources, inadequate infrastructure facilities such as rural roads and landing sites, high vulnerability to natural disasters and adverse impacts of climate change, risky and harsh working and living conditions, inadequate access to basic social services, as well as weak representation and participation in decisions affecting their lives."

So, when in February 2011, COFI 29 approved "the development of a new international instrument on small-scale fisheries that would draw on relevant existing instruments, complementing the Code (of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries)", this was a signal to ICSF and its partners to invest time and effort in raising awareness about the importance of such an instrument. It was also a signal to start preparing a

common civil society position on the scope and content of such an instrument that would inform the process of its development.

ICSF, together with the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF), the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC), have made some significant progress towards raising awareness about, and achieving consensus amongst fishworker organizations and their support organizations, on the importance of the proposed instrument tentatively titled "VG-SSF".

Since August 2011, the civil society partnership referred to above has rallied support for and, through their various networks, implemented at least 12 national-level and two regional-level consultation workshops across Asia (India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan), Africa (Uganda, South Africa and a regional workshop in Senegal), and Latin America (Brazil, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Panama, and a regional workshop amongst six central American countries in Nicaragua).

The consultations have focused on developing countries, given the COFI

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Opening of the regional Voluntary Guidelines for Small-scale Fisheries (VG-SSF) workshop in Nicaragua. Such regional workshops helped raise awareness about the importance of such an instrument

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Fishworkers and authorities in El Salvador discussing the outcomes of the workshop. The VG-SSF guidelines seek to protect and promote small-scale fisheries

which may be called small-scale in one situation may be large-scale in another.”

While national-level consultations have celebrated this diversity, they have also highlighted unity in the face of the diverse problems shared. Perhaps nowhere more so than in central America is such diversity and unity apparent. Wedged between the two American subcontinents, the central American region is characterized by a wide diversity of fishery ecosystems and resources (both marine and inland), on the one hand, and, on the other, by a huge melting pot of races and cultures, whose ethnic origins can be traced to all parts of the globe—with communities identifying themselves with a plethora of indigenous peoples, mixed races, and with people of African or European descent. All these communities have strong traditions and have strong cultural ties to the land, sea and water bodies, which are reflected in the diversity of fishery-related activities and cultures.

Coastal areas of the central American region, being situated in the hurricane belt, are particularly prone to the impact of extreme weather conditions. In the first decade of 2000, notably in 2005, there was a very high incidence of tropical storms and hurricanes. It remains to be seen whether this is a rising trend, and, if so, what kinds of disaster-mitigation measures could be effective in making fishery activities safer, and fishing communities more secure.

The main issues arising from the central American region include the following:

- The small-scale fishing sector comprises fishers as well as all sectors of society who play a role in the production chain and who pursue a way of life with its own cultural identity, including women, youth, and the elderly.
- The high degree of heterogeneity of artisanal fisheries is reflected in the variety of different communities—of African descent, indigenous communities, *mestizos* (mixed race), and settlers of various kinds; it is reflected also in the structures of organizations and associations

mandate that the instrument should “focus on the needs of developing countries”, and given that it is difficult to mobilize funds for such consultations in industrialized countries. However, until otherwise decided, the VG-SSF guidelines are to be “global in scope”, and there is considerable interest to see how the guidelines could apply to small-scale fisheries, both North and South. As noted by John Kurien, ICSF Founder Member: “There is a widely held opinion that small-scale fisheries are largely restricted to the developing countries with a maritime tradition. This is not true. In fact, small-scale fisheries flourish in the marine, riverine or lacustrine ecosystems of many developed and developing countries with a fishery tradition worthy of mention.”

One of the difficulties facing such a process is how to define or otherwise characterize small-scale fisheries, when one of the characteristics is diversity. According to Kurien, “Small-scale fisheries the world over have evolved in time and space from specific ecological, and changing socioeconomic and cultural, contexts which are marked by diversity rather than homogeneity. Any discussion on small-scale fisheries must, therefore, reckon with the fact that there is a definitional problem, which, despite the prolific nature of the literature on the subject, has not been sorted out...” and therefore, “definitions are not universally applicable and that

(co-operatives, community-based organizations, indigenous institutions); and in the diversity of geographic areas and ecosystems—coastal and inland areas, Pacific and Caribbean coasts, islands, lakes and rivers; therefore, any policies, regulations and measures put forward should consider and accommodate these conditions and differences.

- The main issues in common are poverty and marginalization. Achieving responsible and sustainable fisheries is not possible in a context of poverty and hopelessness. It is equally important to maintain equality between men and women, and the equality of artisanal fishing communities before the law.
- Fishery-dependent communities face competition, encroachment and pollution from aquaculture, from intensive agriculture (notably of sugarcane), tourism, urban and industrial development, trawling in coastal waters, and so on. Another issue is violence from drug trafficking.
- There is a prevalence of, and need to defend, exclusive artisanal fishing areas. (In Nicaragua these extend to three miles on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, and 25 miles around the islands and bays; in Costa Rica, three miles out to sea and with special provisions for 'marine areas for responsible fisheries'; in Honduras, industrial fishing and trawling are allowed outside nine miles or outside 60-m depths). There are also calls for protecting inland waters that are reserved for artisanal fishing.
- Support is required for forming fishworker associations that can represent communities and groups in decision-making processes. Associations are weak and marginalized in the fishery-management and decision-making processes. Communities and groups need to be enabled to plan and implement fisheries management and conservation programmes with the authorities.

- In the post-harvest sector, there is a need for support to market the fish catch and ensure a fair return on labour for fishworkers.
- Calls have been made for the provision of social security (sickness and retirement benefits) and basic amenities like water, healthcare and education.
- In the face of climate change, extreme weather conditions and events, disaster-mitigation programmes are needed to deal with such impacts as invasive species and coastal flooding, and to establish early warning systems.

While many of these issues need to be addressed at national or even local levels, they highlight the need for an overarching framework that recognizes the rights of fishing communities to life and livelihood. We hope the VG-SSF Guidelines will provide us with such a framework. 📌

For more



<https://sites.google.com/site/smallscalefisheries/events>

Civil Society Website on the VG-SSF Process

www.fao.org/fishery/topic/16152/154368/en

FAO Page on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries

www.fao.org/righttofood/publi09/Fisheries_en.pdf

Fisheries and the Right to Food

www.srfood.org

United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-2979.2011.00405.x/full>

Rights-based Fisheries Governance: From Fishing Rights to Human Rights by E H Allison et al. 2011

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/advisorycommittee/session8/documentation.htm>

Final Study on the Advancement of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, UN Human Rights Council

www.fao.org/cfs/cfs-home/cfs-land-tenure/en

Information on the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security