

Eyes on the Prize

Small-scale fisheries and the SSF Guidelines were front and centre at the Thirty-fifth Session of the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI)

The 35th session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI-35) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was organized in the hybrid mode on September 5-9 at the FAO headquarters in Rome. The committee reviewed current issues and challenges related to fisheries and aquaculture. The meeting reaffirmed the importance of small-scale fisheries (SSF) and reiterated the contributions of SSF to food security, sustainability, livelihoods and social and cultural well-being.

COFI-35 was preceded by the SSF Summit – offering an opportunity to celebrate the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA), to promote dialogue and collaborations between SSF organizations and stakeholders, and to review efforts to implement the SSF Guidelines across the world.

Qu Dongyu, FAO Director-General, inaugurated the IYAFA High Level Event at COFI-35, stating that “consumption is the real driving force” and highlighted the role of small-scale and artisanal fisheries in ensuring sustainability.

Margaret Nakato, winner of the 2020-21 Margarita Lizárraga Medal, represented the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) Working Group on Fisheries. She spoke about how IYAFA 2022 encouraged activities to strengthen SSF globally. She noted the various activities supporting a smooth transition towards the uptake of the SSF Guidelines. These included enhancing women’s engagement in the sector; raising awareness about the SSF Guidelines; developing national plans of action (NPOAs) for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines; and the formation of regional advisory groups. Christiana Louwa, representing (IPC) Working Group on Fisheries, also spoke at the high-level event.

Peter Thomson, the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for the Ocean, drew attention to the role of COFI in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 and the importance of fisheries and aquaculture in catering to global food security.

Stand up, get counted

Country representatives from Saudi Arabia and Indonesia opened members’ statements by sharing their commitment towards the sustainable use of aquatic natural resources and their contribution to the healthy ocean agenda. Indonesia detailed its road map for a Blue Economy, inclusive of fishers and fishworkers.

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Thailand described its actions to strengthen SSF and aquaculture by improving fishers’ participation in policy-making. Madagascar detailed its efforts against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and called for collaboration at various levels to build resilience. While reaffirming the vital role of SSF, Madagascar said that Blue Growth should become a pathway to sustainability.

Peru said the COVID-19 pandemic and other international crises continue to have a negative impact on fisheries across the globe. As the chair of the IYAFA Steering Committee, Peru shared its vision for national policies that are inclusive of artisanal fisheries, calling for worldwide efforts to formalize the sector through better visibility, credit availability, improved infrastructure and capacity building.

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While noting the interconnectedness of SDGs, the European Union (EU) representative remarked that sustainability ought to characterize SSF. The United States noted the contribution of SSF to livelihood and nutrition security, drawing attention to structural issues like invisibility of women in the sector.

As the observer for Latin America and the Caribbean region in the IYafa International Steering Committee, Chile discussed an action plan agreed upon by the sub-regional committee from the Meso-American region, including fishing authorities from Mexico and Central America. The action plan encouraged the inclusion

important in the implementation of the SSF Guidelines.

Costa Rica underscored the importance of adopting a human rights perspective, with special attention to gender equity and decent work. The Indonesian representation encouraged FAO to develop a regional strategy for the implementation of the SSF Guidelines, urged FAO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to create joint agreements and initiatives in support of small-scale aquaculture. Brazil explained their recent initiatives like modernization of the national fishers' registration system and regulation of artisanal activities for the sustainable development of small-scale and artisanal fisheries, and shared their hope towards the availability of improved data on SSF and strengthening of an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries (EAF).

The Philippines and Cameroon stressed the need to integrate community knowledge in conservation efforts. The EU commented on the specific challenges faced by SSF in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and appreciated the call from SSF organizations at the UN Ocean Conference in June 2022 to address these challenges and to ensure that SSF are protected and continue to contribute to economies, health, culture and well-being.

Mexico requested FAO's technical support to close development gaps in SSF. Russia supported the SSF Guidelines and pointed specifically to the need to protect the indigenous communities in SSF. Tanzania urged the African Union to establish a regional committee on IYafa to enhance visibility of SSF at the regional level. Welcoming the call to continue the SSF Summit prior to COFI-35, Norway promised its continued support to SSF, especially in post-harvest fisheries and women's rights. Uganda, Kenya and Chile highlighted the need to have effective participation in decision-making processes and appreciated the role of women and youth in SSF. The United States said effective co-management is crucial for the sustainable development of the sector.

Non-governmental voices

Civil society participation was significant at COFI-35. The IPC Working Group on Fisheries expressed

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of artisanal fishers and aquaculture workers into national social-protection systems, the creation of a Meso-American network of small-scale fishers and aquaculture workers and capacity building of small-scale fishers to improve their resilience.

Maria Helena Semedo, the Deputy Director-General of FAO, while delivering the closing remarks on the IYafa high-level event, assured COFI members and observers that the agenda on SSF will be reflected in the plenary sessions and outcomes of COFI-35. She urged all stakeholders to make 2022 the beginning of a new era in support of SSF.

The global SSF agenda

The agenda item on 'Supporting Small-scale and Artisanal Fisheries' ignited extensive discussions on the SSF Guidelines. FAO members listed legislative and governance measures undertaken to implement the SSF Guidelines in their countries. They acknowledged the role of IYafa 2022 in supporting sustainable SSF and increasing the sub-sector's visibility. Ecuador noted social development and food security of small-scale fishing communities consistent with the SSF Guidelines as a pertinent issue, stating that data collection at different scales is



Qu Dongyu, FAO Director General inaugurating the 35th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (5-9 September 2022) at the FAO Headquarters, Rome

its concerns about the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), considering the persistent discrimination against women, Indigenous People and other vulnerable groups in the sector. IPC reiterated its commitment to work closely with the governments and FAO in strengthening the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. It also called for mechanisms to deal with IUU in the traditional small-scale fishing zones.

The African Confederation of Professional Organizations of Artisanal Fisheries (CAOPA) urged FAO to take concrete actions to improve the lives and livelihoods of SSF. CAOPA also called for a participatory surveillance involving fishers to combat IUU. The Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements (CFFA) called on FAO and its members to ensure preferential access to SSF and to develop strategic national plans to guarantee access to resources and markets for SSF.

Supporting the call for an SSF summit prior to each COFI session, ICSF stressed the importance of meaningful participation of fishing communities, calling for expansion of legal spaces for fishworker associations at the national

and sub-national levels. The ICSF statement also requested disaggregated catch data on shares of different gear groups in the forthcoming Illuminating Hidden Harvests (IHH) study by FAO, Duke University and WorldFish.

Responding to the discussions, Nicole Franz, FAO's Fishery Planning Officer, appreciated the progress in the implementation of the SSF Guidelines and the SSF summit, and stressed the need for having enabling policy environments for strong fisherworker organizations.

The chairperson opened the discussions on the proposal to establish the sub-committee on fisheries management by stating that it will ensure improved participation and availability of resources. Most of the members agreed to the establishment of the new body within COFI, while a few—Costa Rica, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico and Peru—pointed to the increased financial implications it will have on developing countries. Norway supported the establishment of a new sub-committee and promised its support. Australia said that a new sub-committee should ensure that it does not duplicate the discussions in the

COFI sessions. The United States noted that SSF should be the core agenda item of the proposed sub-committee on fisheries management.

During the discussion on addressing climate change in fisheries and aquaculture, member states noted the interconnectedness of climate change and fisheries, acknowledging the sector's vulnerability. Suriname flagged climate change as the "serious development challenge of the Caribbean"; New Zealand called it "an existential issue". The Dominican Republic and Tanzania emphasized the need to strengthen early warning systems and other measures to make fisheries more resilient against natural disasters.


The EU and Canada insisted on adopting an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management to understand the interaction between climate change and fisheries. Australia called for a transparent and collaborative approach to mitigate the same. The Secretariat commented on the need to mainstream climate change in national fisheries policies, highlighting the specific needs of the most vulnerable communities.

On agenda item 10 on mainstreaming biodiversity in fisheries and aquaculture, members stated that biodiversity is an economic and social good and urged FAO to actively engage in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) process. Members detailed various threats to biodiversity and their impacts on fisheries. While stressing the importance of area-based fisheries management strategies and collaboration with regional fisheries bodies, the CBD Secretariat mentioned that mainstreaming biodiversity in fisheries is important and the proposed Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework has direct linkages to fisheries and aquaculture. They urged countries to adopt the same in their fisheries policies. In its statement, ICSF stressed the need for conservation efforts to recognize the human rights of local communities, to involve them in managing coastal areas and to take into account their free, prior and informed consent.

The EU, China, Malaysia, Australia, Switzerland, Norway, Canada, the UK, India and the United States were among the FAO members and regional groups that welcomed the WTO Agreement on

Fisheries Subsidies. While welcoming the WTO Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, ICSF encouraged further development of the overfishing and overcapacity pillar in the agreement; it called for the extension of special and differential treatment to low-income, resource-poor and livelihood fishing—a proxy for small-scale fishing—in developing countries. ICSF concurred that FAO provides technical support to WTO with regard to overfishing.

COFI-35 and the preceding SSF Summit provided renewed momentum for States, civil society and other stakeholders to collaboratively implement the SSF Guidelines, to discuss new and persistent challenges facing SSF communities, and to draw attention to issues relevant to SSF, including social development, access to resources and markets, gender equity and human rights. It reaffirmed the interconnectedness of fisheries, biodiversity loss and climate change; it shed light on the need to address these challenges by adopting an approach based on human rights and through international and intersectoral collaboration.

Meeting in person after four years, and coinciding with IYAF 2022, COFI-35 saw wide participation from member States and observers from civil society, UN agencies and intergovernmental organizations. They offered hope that fishing communities and their supporters can redouble their efforts to implement the SSF Guidelines to achieve a sustainable and thriving SSF in the future. 

For more

Committee on Fisheries Thirty-fifth Session, 5-9 September 2022 Rome, Italy

<https://www.fao.org/about/meetings/cofi/documents-cofi35/en/>

Report of the 35th Session of the Committee on Fisheries (5–9 September 2022)

<https://www.fao.org/3/nk497en/nk497en.pdf>

Thirty-fifth Session of the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) on Agenda Item 5: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Statement by ICSF

<https://www.icsf.net/resources/cofi-35-icsf-statement-agenda-item5/>