

# Winning the First Battle

Sri Lanka has incorporated the SSF Guidelines into its remodelled fisheries policy. Now, it needs to put it into action

Sri Lanka recently amended the National Fisheries Policy, incorporating all relevant SSF Guidelines. A number of institutions supported and facilitated this welcome change. They include the Sri Lanka Forum for Small-Scale Fisheries (SLFSSF); the National Fisheries Solidarity (NAFSO); an array of renowned scientists; and two important international organizations, namely, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

criticism was driven by concerns that emerged from a unique international initiative to improve the management of small-scale fisheries (SSF).

They emerged from a global consultation FAO had conducted, covering 120 countries in a bottom-up, participatory process. It involved about 4,000 representatives of governments, small-scale fishers, academia and researchers, civil society organizations and community organizations, among others. Consequently, in Rome in 2014, FAO member states accepted the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines).

It is the first international instrument dedicated entirely to the SSF sector that is immensely important, although often neglected. The FAO, the World Bank and other international development agencies strongly recommended the incorporation of the SSF Guidelines into the national fisheries policies of the countries in which the SSF sub-sectors play an important role in food and nutritional security, employment generation and poverty alleviation.

FAO initiated a process in 2018 of implementing the SSF Guidelines. Among the eight countries selected for a pilot project was Sri Lanka. SLFSSF implemented the project with ICSF's assistance and funds from FAO. It drew from island-wide consultations carried out in 12 out of 15 fisheries districts. It included fishers, women fisherfolk and all State institutions working alongside the Department of Fisheries. By August 2019, the Small-Scale Fisheries Policy was prepared. Its prescriptions were based on the results of stakeholder consultations that discussed and analyzed the parts of the SSF Guidelines relevant to Sri Lanka's fisheries.

It was felt that these recommendations fell short of addressing some major issues related to inland fisheries. Subsequently, a

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The policy will soon be submitted to the cabinet of ministers. Its adoption by the national parliament is expected soon. This is a great victory for not only the fishing communities but for all the people of the country, as also for all those who have contributed towards implementing the SSF Guidelines across the world. Still, it is worth remembering that this is only the first part of the campaign; it does not guarantee the implementation of the guidelines. The next phase of this effort is to ensure the policy is translated into action.

Sri Lanka first created a national fisheries policy in 2018. Technical and financial assistance for this came from the Norwegian government. It went through comprehensive stakeholder consultations. Yet it remained a white paper submitted to the cabinet, not approved by parliament. Several parties, including SLFSSF, were critical of certain policy prescriptions, especially because some critical issues had received inadequate attention. The

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OSCAR AMARASINGHE



Hauling a beach-seine net in the eastern province of Sri Lanka. Beach-seine fishers are losing their seine-laying coastal space for powerful tourism stakeholders in many parts of the country

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separate consultation process was conducted by the National Fisheries Solidarity and the SLFSSF in areas where inland fisheries were widespread. This produced another policy document: the Inland Fisheries Policy of 2021.

SLFSSF combined the two to prepare a comprehensive policy paper. In this the new policy prescriptions were compared with the policy recommendations of the existing National Fisheries Policy of 2018, under various thematic areas. The aim was to improve the 2018 policy by taking into account the recommendations of this comprehensive policy document. This proposed 'remodelled' policy document was sent to the ministry in February 2021. The SLFSSF president made a presentation to the ministry officials, explaining the process and the need to incorporate relevant SSF Guidelines into the National Fisheries Policy 2018. The ministry accepted this in principle, deciding to remodel the National Fisheries Policy of 2018.

#### **Policy remodelled**

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the work that was revitalized in 2022. The ministry prepared a remodelled policy and appointed a panel of experts.

It included SLFSSF and other fisheries experts to ensure that all relevant SSF Guidelines are incorporated. This move on the part of the fisheries authorities was commendable. This work happened in the last two months of 2022. By mid-January 2023, the final remodelled policy document was completed. After several rounds of talks among fisheries officials, the ministry brass, along with the panel of experts, unanimously approved the policy with some minor rewording. It will now go for translating into the two languages used in the country, Sinhala and Tamil. Then, it will be submitted to the cabinet.

Although endorsed in 2014, the SSF Guidelines remained unknown in Sri Lanka, until the efforts in 2018 for their implementation. From SLFSSF and ICSF to FAO, all parties involved played a vital role in bringing attention to the guidelines. It impressed the government's fisheries authorities about this instrument addressing most of the issues affecting fishery communities—a group that is highly vulnerable to diverse threats and poverty.

The positive interventions included initiatives to turn information into knowledge. The drive to remodel policy not only collected information but

also analyzed, studied and moulded that information into knowledge. The participatory experience turned into a model of how innovative ideas can mobilize all stakeholders.

Another achievement was how SLFSSF's leadership displayed 'unity in diversity'. Its membership includes State actors, academics, researchers, civil society organizations and agents of change in the community, among others. This wide range of actors contributed to all policy prescriptions. The involvement of State agencies helped engender trust among various actors.

While the remodelled policy has a strong people-oriented focus, two more hurdles must be overcome: approval by the cabinet and by parliament. Any drastic changes are unlikely because the remodelled policy has emerged from a comprehensive and interactive

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process. The ministry's approach in all discussions was conscientious and supportive, both respecting knowledge and inviting constructive criticism. This deserves a special note of appreciation.


A sound national fisheries policy, based on the SSF Guidelines, does not guarantee by itself the security and sustainability of the SSF sector. For that, the policy must translate into action. As aptly described by Jentoft and Chuenpagdee (2022, in Jentoft et al (eds), *Blue Justice*), there are three governance orders. The first is the meta-order at the top that deals with rights and principles. Broad guidelines like policy prescriptions fall into this.

The second order is the institutions of governance that are critical to translating policy into action. This decides the 'rules of the game'. It is important that the institutions are set up with the right values and with far-sightedness. For this we must follow an interactive process, with the participation of all relevant stakeholders. This will bring scientific knowledge to decision-making, ensuring effective 'knowledge

translation', as against the usual process of scientific knowledge ending up in libraries.

Finally, the third order: interaction among stakeholders on the ground in a participatory atmosphere. In this regard, mechanisms like co-management have now become quite popular. Yet this concept is misunderstood. Many see it as a platform for State actors to sit together with community representatives to make decisions. In fact, such platforms often do not ensure effective participation of fishing communities. Co-management platforms, it is critical, must be truly integrated, inclusive, participatory and holistic.

Gaps in language seriously limit effective participation by fisher stakeholders. In general, ordinary people can hardly understand the language used by government agencies. Officials tend to use words that emphasize their view, insisting that people to see things from their perspective. Resolving this problem requires training and capacity building of people at the bottom—only this can ensure their effective participation in decision-making. An example of this was how the SSF Guidelines were presented to fishing communities in their own language—in simplified terms and reworded guidelines, posters and factsheets—during the policy development process.

All the effort made already by multiple parties so in Sri Lanka will prove futile if their resulting policy is not translated into action. The government has an important role. It must establish enabling institutions, preparing action plans and regulating patterns of interactions among diverse stakeholders. It must stay with the interactive processes that ensured effective participation of all in decision making. 

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